



Yoshiko Kanazawa



Yoshiko Kanazawa outside the Japanese American Museum of San Jose

“I remember my little sister crying because it was so hot and uncomfortable and my father would walk her around the camp, patting her back and saying his Buddhist chants. And that’s how he would put her to sleep.”

Yoshiko Kanazawa, a resident of San Jose and docent at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose, recalls her family's wartime experience through a child's eyes. As the daughter of Denjiro and Teruha Nakahiro — two Issei from Shikoku — she was raised in the diverse Southern California neighborhood of Pasadena with four older brothers and sisters. Her father worked as a gardener and had cultivated a loyal group of clients and friends that would help the Nakahiro family transition through their sudden uprooting, as well as their resettlement back to their original home. But on the day of Pearl Harbor, Yoshiko's father was simply shocked, refusing to believe that Japan would have attacked the U.S. "He said in Japanese, 'No. Something like that would never happen. You must have heard it wrong. Japan would never do that.'" But of course, he was wrong.

However, Yoshiko's memories of her family's plight through camp was that of a silver lining, emphasizing her love for school and that both of her parents looked at the incarceration with the utmost positivity, recalling what her father told the family. "I told you that America is at war. And so they have to do these things to keep the country secure. And so we should follow along the best we can."

I am Yoshiko Kanazawa. I was Yoshiko Nakahiro until I got married and then I became a Kanazawa. I was born on October 9, 1935 and my parents already had four children, two girls and two boys, so I was the youngest of five.

Where were you born?

I was born in Pasadena, at home.

And what was a typical day for you before the war?

I don't remember a single day. But I remember some of the things we did. School was very important to me. I went to the same school that my sisters and brothers had gone to, so all the teachers knew me. And I typically, what I really enjoyed was going to the library. And in fact, when I was reading my first grade teacher's comments, she had commented that I had helped the classroom a lot with my library books. So, that was very important to me.

On the weekends in the summer, we had a tent and we would go to the beach, set up this big tent and there were only certain beaches we could go to. And one of them was Redondo Beach. And then another one was at the bay in San Pedro. And then we had several uncles. We would visit them on the weekends, too. My father was a gardener and my mother was a stay-at-home-mom. She did a lot of sewing for us, and we didn't have a lot of money but they made everything stretch. They were very frugal. I remember my father just had one pair of good shoes and he kept them shiny all the time.

So they were Issei?

They were, and they were both from Ehime-ken on the island of Shikoku.

And when did they both come to the U.S.?

My father came first in 1919. And he went to Spokane. He worked on the railroads and he made enough money that he could go back to Japan and, I think the marriage was arranged, but he married my mother who lived in a nearby village. They both lived in seaside towns. Very charming places. I have visited them, or visited their grave there. They wanted to be buried in Japan.

So you kind of had a typical upbringing?

Yes, that's right. And I had just started Japanese school. And we would go to the zen temple in Los Angeles in Little Tokyo.

Interesting. So what do you remember about the day Pearl Harbor happened?

You know, I don't remember exactly. But my father talked about it enough that I do have memories from what he told me and not from what I remember. But my sister went out to tell him – he was working out in the yard – that the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. And he said in Japanese, “No. Something like that would never happen. You must have heard it wrong.” or “That's not right. Japan would never do that.” So my

sister went back in the house, she heard more about it, went back out to tell my dad it *really* did happen. And so he came in the house and started talking on the phone to his friends and found out it was really true. And he felt that the people in the army, who didn't really know what a country, how great of a country America was. How large! And here was tiny Japan, attacking America. And he could not believe that they would have done something like that. He felt that the people in the Navy knew what the rest of the world was like.

I see. In the Japanese Navy?

Right.

So he was just shocked?

Totally, totally shocked.

Did he get a sense that there was gonna be some backlash because of that?

Yes. They felt like our lives were going to change. They didn't know how it would change. But they knew something would happen.

And so it happens and Christmas passes, and you know it's kind of this strange, maybe foreboding feeling that something is about to change for your family.

That's right. And there were people who had short wave radios and they would get the news from Japan. And I know the people in Japan felt very encouraged that the attack was so successful. So if you see any Japanese programs that show the Japanese after Pearl Harbor, they were doing their bonzais.

That's interesting because, you know, you would think there are so many people that migrated from Japan to the U.S. that they had relatives, and you



Young Yoshiko

just wonder what those families were feeling.

That's right, yes. My father had a lot of family and my mother had all of her family in Japan. Yeah. And they were very concerned about what would happen to us.

Right. So when Executive Order 9066 came out, what were some of the things you remember that started to happen?

You know my mother had a brother who was in the Japanese Army. And she had some pictures of him and they went through their albums, finding his pictures, and then throwing them into the fire. And my uncle had already been taken from his family. He lived in San Pedro and had a three-story house and the FBI claimed that he was signaling the Japanese ships from his porch on the third floor. So, he had already been taken away. We knew that something would happen. My mother started sewing a duffle bag for each of us and then she sewed heavy bathrobes for us for each of the kids. Because there had been rumors that we were going to a very cold country. Then there were rumors that we were going to a dry desert area. So my father bought goggles for us. So they were getting prepared. He was also making arrangements of what we would do with our belongings. He was a gardener in Pasadena and he had served those people well for many years. The ones who had large homes said, "You can keep your things in our house. We have extra room or a basement where you could keep your things." So we didn't have to sell off our things like a lot of people did. We were living in a rented house and our owner lived right behind us. And he had told my dad we could leave things with him too. So my dad arranged to leave his truck there, because we would use that until the very end. And

then the mattresses that we slept on, he said we could keep those in his house, also. So we didn't have to sell off things. That was a good thing.

Did you experience some kind of discrimination or anything right up until you left?

I did not. But maybe because all my friends were younger, too. I didn't, but my brothers and my sisters and my parents may have felt something. Yes.

And you mentioned that you hadn't finished first grade?

Yes, that's right. I was in the first grade – and I think I've told you that – my teacher wrote me a letter.

Do you want to read from it?

Okay, it's very torn up but my mother must have kept it for me:

My dear Yoshiko,

Your letters have thrilled the children. We all are so glad to hear from you. We have a new boy, John. And a different one named Bruce.

And she writes that Mary Frances has the measles. Just telling me about the children in the class. And then we had started to make a little village. And I had made the church out of blocks and wood. And she said there is a bell in the church now. And then she says:

Thank you for your letters, and tell your mother and father I thank them for their kind letter.

So I just thought it was very nice that she would take the time to write me a letter. She must have felt kindly towards me to do that.

Were you the only Japanese American student?

One of a few, yes.

You were lucky in a sense that everyone around you was supportive.

And wanted to help you.

Yes that's right. And the people, my father's clients, had all been so kind to us.

So, you finally have to leave. Where did you go and what were the conditions like in the assembly center?

The assembly center that we went to was in Tulare. And it was a fairground. It was right next to Highway 99. We could see the cars whizzing by. I remember the fence because people, my parents and other people told us, "You can't get close to the fence or they're gonna shoot you." So that was a fear that I carried. And when we first got to the assembly center we had to wait in a long line and everyone was given a smallpox and a typhoid fever shot. And of course, having both of them at the same time, I had a reaction and I ran a high fever for a few days. And here we were in this strange place. I remember that. I remember being very clingy to my mother. I just stayed by her all the time.

And you were living in barracks?

Yes. Fortunately I was in a barrack and not in a horse stall like many families had to live.

So when did you actually leave the assembly center and head to Gila River?

That was in September. We went from Tulare to Gila, Arizona. And I remember stopping at Union Station in Los Angeles. And I knew where that was because whenever my family went from Pasadena to Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, we always passed by the Union Station. So I remember wanting to peek because we had to keep our shades down on the train, and I really wanted to peek, but I knew I couldn't because there was a soldier walking back and forth with his rifle. So I didn't dare take a peek. And I can't remember if they fed us, or what they did. I just can't remember any of that.

That must have been really hard to go back towards your home.

Yes. That was a very traumatic experience for me. And then we got to Phoenix, we got off the train and I can't remember whether we were put on a truck or a bus. But I remember the long ride, and it was desolate. It was a desert. I mean it's not like Phoenix is today. And so I just didn't know where we were going and neither did my parents. We got to the camp and it wasn't quite ready. So what I remember are these ditches with water running through them and they weren't covered yet. So they had planks that you had to walk across in order to get to the bathroom. I was six and a half and to me, it was too frightening to walk across the plank so I used a little chamber pot in our barrack and didn't want to go to the bathroom. I had to go take a shower there but my mother held my hand tight, took me across.

And at this point, you had all older sisters?

Yes, two older sisters and two older brothers.

So were they responsible for looking after you? Or was it mostly your mother?

You know at times it was my sister who was very close in age to me, she did a lot for me. But I think I stuck with my mother the most.

And did your parents ever tell you what was going on or talk to the kids, even though they were so bewildered? Did they ever say anything to you?

In the camp itself it was more the idea of *shikata ga nai* and the idea that America was at war. They wouldn't be treating us like that, if we had not been at war with Japan. And so it truly was a *shikata ga nai*, so just try to endure, *gaman*. That's what I heard from them. They didn't blame the American government and make us feel hateful towards the government. It was just, "Let's just make the best of this."

And that is the common story from so many, especially Issei.

That's right.



Yoshiko's third grade class in Gila River on Halloween. Yoshiko is in the first row, second from left.

What else do you remember, in camp?

You know when we first got there before school was organized, I remember a fun time because all the kids in the block – there were about 12 or 14 barracks in the block – played together. And we would play capture the flag and half the kids would be on one team and the other half on the other. Or kick the can. And so there was a real camaraderie. I remember that as a happy time. And then when school started I was very excited about that because I missed the end of first grade. And so I was very excited about starting second grade. And then on top of that my cousin, who lived in the next block, she was a sophomore at Berkeley when she was sent to the camp. And she became my second grade teacher. And so she would be preparing flashcards and various lesson plans. And she would tell me what she was doing and I would study her flashcards. So later she told me, “You were the smartest one in the class! You always raised your hand and knew all the answers.” And I thought, well sure, because I had a head start. But I loved school.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Days Present	27	18	20	36	27	55
Days Absent						
Times Tardy	1	12	8	0	3	0
Each absence, however short, interferes with the child's progress.	0	0	0	0	0	0

SUBJECTS TAUGHT	1	2	3	4	5	6
Oral English	S	S	S	S	S	S
Reading	S	S	S	S	S	S
Numbers	S	S	S	S	S	S
Writing	S	S	S	S	S	S
Spelling	S	S	S	S	S	S
Music	S	S	S	S	S	S
Play	S	S	S	S	S	S
Nature Study	S	S	S	S	S	S

EXPLANATION OF MARKS
 "S" does work which a child of his ability should do.
 "X" a child of his ability could do better.

TEACHER'S COMMENTS

FIRST REPORT
 We call your attention to your child's Exceptional effort in All Work
 High achievement in All Subjects
 Marked improvement in All Subjects
 Splendid attitude in Classroom
 COMMENTS BY TEACHER:
Asahiko does very good work in classroom
attitude is very satisfactory

THIRD REPORT
 We call your attention to your child's Exceptional effort in All Work
 High achievement in All Subjects
 Marked improvement in All Subjects
 Splendid attitude in Classroom
 COMMENTS BY TEACHER:
Nice work - a
very good
attitude

FIFTH REPORT
 We call your attention to your child's Exceptional effort in All Work
 High achievement in All Subjects
 Marked improvement in All Subjects
 Splendid attitude in Classroom
 COMMENTS BY TEACHER:
Nice work - a
very good
attitude

One of Yoshiko's report cards in Gila River

It sounds like you did.

I did, I loved school. And I've met many people through the museum who would tell me, "Oh I was in second grade too and I don't remember going to school." I don't know if it was a bad experience they had or what. But it was such an important part of my life. And my father became a chef in the camp. He was in the block right next to me. And the authorities did give us permission to eat at his kitchen. So I enjoyed that. I felt like I was eating his food.

And had he cooked before? Was he a good cook?

He learned! [laughs]

He had to learn. And was your cousin the only Japanese American teacher that you had?

I don't know about that. But I had her until she was able to leave the camp and she got to go to college at the University of Chicago. So she moved away. And then we had Caucasian teachers — these were people who came and taught in the camps. They had living conditions better than what we had, but they did live in the camp also.

There was one who was very kind and the other was a very strict teacher. I don't know if she would have been that way wherever she was teaching. But she was quite strict. And then for a short time I had a young man who had just graduated high school there in the camp and he was teaching our fourth grade class. He had all these mimeograph sheets of tests that he would time us and test us and they were on all the math facts. I always felt when I came out of the camp what good training that was.

What other memories of camp stayed with you throughout the years?

You know, I had a very good friend. My parents knew her parents. She and I used to put on little talent shows. And we would charge the kids in the block maybe five cents or something to come to our talent show. I don't know what we did, sang or danced or something. That was a lot of fun. And one story that my father told me but no one else in the family remembers is when Eleanor Roosevelt came to our camp. She visited my father's kitchen and he had just baked some biscuits and he gave her one of his biscuits, and she really liked it [*laughs*]. So I like to tell that story. He didn't tell me lies, so I feel like it must be true.

I am sure it was true! Just a very small exchange but it meant a lot.

Right. That's right. It did mean a lot to him. And then I had a little sister who was born in the camp. And she added a lot to my life. Because I had been the youngest and I was so happy to have a younger sister. She was born at the hospital and my father and I walked to the hospital, and the authorities had arranged for us to have a car that drove us back to our barrack. And that was the only time I rode in a car in the three and a half years that I was in the camp. So I remember that. And then I remember my little sister crying because it was so hot and uncomfortable and my father would walk her around the camp, patting her back and saying his Buddhist chants. And that's how he would put her to sleep. So we still laugh about that because she remembers the chants. And I don't know if it is because she heard it later. But we always say, "That's how Papa put you to sleep."

Wow, that's amazing. And at this time your mother was taking care of all of you and making sure everything was okay?

Yes. She took a tailoring class in camp. And so she became quite good at tailoring also. And after we were in the camp for maybe a year



Yoshiko sits in the barracks room at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose

and a half, people on the outside were allowed to send things to the people. And the lady who was holding my mother's sewing machine for her shipped it to her. So my mother was able to sew clothes for us and that kept her busy, too.

Your parents were very self-sufficient.

They truly were. I think that's what makes me so proud of them. That they did the best they could for their children and didn't just sit there and grumble, but they got up and anybody who had any kind of talent, shared it. I remember taking *koto* lessons from a lady. And then my sister was able to take modern dance. And her teacher, she became one of the dancers with Martha Graham.

Now to transition to nearing the end of camp, given that your parents had family in Japan and knew about devastation of Japan, do you know how your parents felt about that?

You know, my parents lived on the island of Shikoku so it was not hit like Honshu was. Or like Hiroshima and Nagasaki where people really lost families. So we didn't lose anyone to the war. I know my mother's younger sister said that they took all the swords that were in the family and they dumped them into the ocean. So they got rid of some of the things that they felt they shouldn't have. But after the war we didn't have that much but we shared what we had with them. I remember sending packages of our old clothing to them and I know they really appreciated that.

And what do you remember about leaving the camp?

When the war was over the government said they would close the camps by such and such date. So then every day people seemed to be leaving and we would go wave goodbye to them as the bus took them from the camp to Phoenix and onward. The coyotes would then come down from the mountains. So at night you could hear them thundering and howling and so that was a very frightening time because the camp was emptying and that was happening. My father left the camp to go to Pasadena to find a place for us to live. Because we had a rented house, he found out that the owner of the house, the man who wanted to take care of my father's truck for him said, "Oh, I am really sorry but I thought you weren't coming back." So he had taken the tires and whatever parts he needed. So the truck was not operative.

But a banker that my father gardened for had been taking care of his finances for him and my father's insurance policy had matured. So he had about four thousand dollars and he bought a little house for us. And so we were able to move into that house. It wasn't a big mansion or anything but it was home for us.

Then, as small as the house was, it only had one bathroom and by then there were six children in the house, other people had no place to go. And the couple begged my father, "Couldn't we stay with you? You know, we will do this or we will do that," and my father let them stay. And then they said, "Our two nephews don't have any place to go — could they stay with us too?" So we shared that house. My oldest sister and my oldest brother started UCLA so they lived in Westwood.

But I always think that's amazing, that they were able to start college right away after coming out of the camp. And my brother said, "I really admire our dad" because he didn't expect them to help take care of the family. He just wanted them to go to college and finish what they wanted to do. A lot of the oldest sons helped the family out financially, so they gave up their college.

That's right, they had to.

I guess we were just lucky that we didn't have to do that. And partly it was since my father was a gardener, when he went back they all hired him again right away. So he had a job, too.

You were lucky.

We were very lucky! And then we got all our things back. And I showed you the picture of me dancing in the first Nisei Week — we didn't have to sell off our things and throw them away and I had the kimono to wear. And so my sister taught me the dances and we participated in the first Nisei Week festival after the war. So life started to come back to normal.

So what was the reception like at school? Was it hard?

You know, I don't recall being nervous going to school. And when I got to school there were white students and black students and they all hovered around me. They wanted to eat lunch with me, they wanted me to play games with them. Some girls wanted me to join their Girl Scout troop. And I had a couple of friends who lived close to the school and they would invite us over for lunch at their homes. And so, I was very lucky.

What happened was, we had a vice principal and she went around to all the classrooms. I was the first Japanese American to come back and she explained what had happened to me and that I was not the enemy and that they should treat me well and welcome me. And that is exactly what they did. Now about a month later the actual principal came back from his tour of duty in the Pacific. We had a big assembly to welcome him back. He got up and he talked about his stories in the Pacific and just used the word "Japs" very freely. And I just cringed. I was so afraid. And, but I don't know if the kids just didn't understand or weren't listening to him or what, but it didn't seem to affect how they felt about me or how they treated me. So, I was very lucky.

The kids may have been just young enough to not let it affect them.

That's right.

And they just saw you as a friend.

That's right. By then they saw me as a friend, not an enemy alien. I think we were fortunate.

And jumping ahead a few years to getting your redress apology and the check, what was your feeling and response when you received that?

By that time I was married. And my husband and I had just wanted to put the camp experience behind us. And he had received his PhD and he was working at IBM and we were doing well. Then when we got the money, even in social groups we were in, people would say, "Well, you know, we're paying for that." So we felt like let's not talk about that money, and we just put it in our savings. And we had become Christians by then and at the Lutheran Church the pastor asked us to give a talk about the Executive Order 9066. And I said, "You know, we really don't want to bring that kind of attention to ourselves. We don't want to talk about that. People really are good to us now and if we bring that up and about the redress money there might be resentment and so we don't want to talk about it." But the assistant pastor wanted a series of talks on journeys people had taken. And she wanted us to talk about our camp journey. And she was persistent – she wouldn't take no for an answer. So we decided to do it, and people were very touched by the stories.



The Kanazawa family: Ruth and James, and their sons Jay and Kay

And how did you and your husband meet?

My husband had volunteered for the army during the Korean War and he got to go to missile schools and what not. But, so, he came to UCLA at the same time I started. And the Japanese kids all stuck together at UCLA at that time. We had a Japanese girls' sorority and I was part of that. And then we had a Nisei Bruin Club and he was also part of that. He was also part of this California Inter-Collegiate Nisei Organization but we met through these activities. And I saw him and I decided, "Here's who I want to marry" [laughs].

Just like that?

Just like that.

From what you described, it sounds as if his family was, I don't know is "patriotic" the right word? Or they were very supportive of trying to help the Japanese American community.

Yes. Their family was totally different from my family because my father-in-law had started a business being the middleman between Japanese farmers and the market. And my mother worked with him in that business, my mother-in-law worked with him. And they had a good life. They took piano lessons and went to private schools, took vacations — things my family was not able to do. He had a brother and the two of them, well the four of them, were having a very good life. They owned their own home. My father-in-law had even bought a home for his parents. So they owned two homes. So they were in a different economic bracket than my family.

They were very good friends with Fred Tayama. And Fred is someone who is very prominent in the JACL. And he was beat up very badly in Manzanar. But those were the kind of friends that they had. And so they were determined to do their part, too. And my father-in-law especially thought, like, the only way to make a better life for his children and grand-children was for him to show his loyalty. So that's why he volunteered for the Army. And when he did, he got up in his camp, in Amache, and he said, "All of us who can volunteer, should volunteer." And people just made noises and drowned him out. And my husband remembers just crying to think that, he

was about 12 then, to think that his father is trying to say something and no one is even listening. So that was an emotional time for him. I would like to share what my mother-in-law had written. This is a postcard that she sent to her cousin in on April 12, 1942:

So sorry I haven't written more often. Things are so uncertain as to the date of our evacuation, as well as to what we are allowed to take. I have been doing nothing but packing and repacking. I do wish they would hurry and decide to move us someplace in the very near future. The sooner the happier I will be. This uncertainty is getting us all down.

And then I wanted to read you excerpts from a long letter she wrote to her cousin when she was in Amache on January 8 of 1943:



Ruth Kanazawa

Mr. Kanazawa is in the army now. He left this camp on December 14 and is at Camp Savage in Minnesota. I should have written you sooner in regards to this matter but I was waiting until I could gather my thoughts calmly. Please do not get excited about me. I am fine and so are the boys. There is nothing to worry about. This is war. And I must take what comes traditionally in the manner of our forefathers. After six months of training at Camp Savage, it's up to the army to decide where to send Mr. Kanazawa. I am lonesome at times but after all, I am a woman in my middle thirties and I am sure I

can manage. Jay is 14 and Kay will be 12 in April. They seem to be missing their father quite a bit but it seems to be making them very serious young men. They are a credit to their father. I am making 19 dollars a month – top wages. As a worker in the documentation department on social welfare. I am chairman of the Granada Federated Women's Group. This is comprised of representative women from each of the twenty-nine blocks. 75% of the women are Isseis and I speak in Japanese. I get along very fine with everyone. Of course some men are jealous of having women leaders.

That's why I call her the first liberated Japanese woman. She was strong.

Is there a lesson you want your grandchildren and great-grandchildren to know about the camps?

There is. I want them to know that my parents and my husband's parents, all did their part in making the internment as positive an experience as they possibly could. My father felt like, "I told you that America is at war. And so they have to do these things. And to keep the country secure. And so we should follow along the best we can." My husband's father volunteered for the 442 and ended up in the MIS, translating documents from Japanese to English. And my husband's mother formed a federation of women at the Amache camp. And she felt like there were some things that men didn't understand, that only women could bring it up. And she organized the women to actually improve the conditions of the camp. So I felt very proud of her, too.

And then there were the people on the outside who helped us, the white people. Like my teacher and my sister's teacher, too. So we had a lot of people helping us. In fact, my son married a Caucasian girl and her great uncle happens to be Robert Fletcher. And he was the man who was an agriculture inspector at the time of the war. So he knew many of the Japanese farmers. Several of the Japanese families asked him if he could take care of their leased land until they got back. So he decided to do that and even gave up his job as an agricultural inspector to do this. And he made sure that the land was used properly and then the profits he got, he only took half of the profits and he put the rest in bank accounts for them. So when those people came back to Florin they had their land. And I want them to know that it wasn't just the Japanese who were making our lives better but that people on the outside were, too. There were some out there who were helping us.

What you said resonates and is happening today in this political climate. Do you feel that that lesson is becoming more important or it's always been?

It's become very important. I'm working here at the museum and these young students come to me and they'll ask me, "Can this happen again?" And I have to say, "Yes, it could. And we have to be watchful and we have to stand up when people are not being treated right." So I feel like by my telling my story they know that this really happened. So it's not something that is just written in a book. It is something that this museum brings to life and the kids know that it could happen again.

And you're making that impact by sharing your story.

I feel like I am. This is an important part of my life. I sort of feel like everything I have done has come together at this museum.



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